

Pompeii

Robert Harris

Robert Harris' *Pompeii* has, like his other historical novels, proved a best-seller, and one which has aroused interest among the general reading public in the Classical world, its extraordinarily sophisticated cultural and technological achievements, and the way in which some of these were catastrophically and spectacularly destroyed by one famous volcanic explosion, only to be preserved by that very eruption to offer one of our most detailed glimpses into life in the Roman world.

Robert Harris talked to Katherine Clarke about the writing of *Pompeii*.

Why do you choose to write historical novels rather than works set in the present?

The attractive thing about historical novels is that they are 'true' at several different levels: they bring a vanished world back to life at the same time as allowing one to comment on the contemporary world without overtly distorting material; in addition, they have the advantage of not going out of date, as would happen very quickly if one tried to write about the contemporary world.

Why Pompeii?

I became interested in writing about the super-power of the USA in 1999, but gave up the idea in 2000. Then my eye was caught by an article on Varones' research at Pompeii and I decided to make the Bay of Naples my Malibu; Pompeii my idealised town.

Your picture of the ancient world is astonishingly detailed. How did you go about researching and writing the book?

I knew I wanted to write about Pompeii, and started reading, but I didn't have the idea of the broken aqueduct for the first six months. I did a large amount of research, and gradually the characters and incidents formed; then solid detail could be built into the picture. I do a huge amount of research for my books. I like to do so much that it is no longer of interest in its own right – being bothered or worried about working out the details or accuracy slows you down. I like to be so immersed in the world I'm writing about that I can just get on and tell the story.

What made you choose the figure of the *aquarius* as the lead character?

I needed a character who would pick up the warning signs identified by Varones; someone who would take the story right out onto the slopes of Vesuvius. My first thought was to tell the tale through the eyes of a doctor, but asphyxiation seemed a boring theme around which to write a novel! And I liked the idea of using the engineer as a new way into the ancient world; I like the characters in my novels to have practical jobs – it makes them more sympathetic for a modern reader. Every generation brings its own interests to Rome, and we are in a good position now to appreciate the highly advanced technological expertise of the Romans.

The time-frame of this work is extremely compressed. Why?

I originally thought that the action of the novel could take place over a week; then five days; then I cut it to four days when I was part of the way through writing. I don't like things to get bogged down; it's a trope of the modern thriller to be very economical on time (think of 7.41 Los Angeles). And then I thought that if I used the Roman time system, it would not only draw the reader into the world of the novel, but it would also be quite fun!

One technical hurdle overcome, then; but was that the most difficult?

The biggest technical problem was that my ideas were based on new research from Mount St Helens, but it was hard to make the characters of the novel describe what was actually happening around them, since they didn't even have the necessary words. The problem was partly solved by using dry technical descriptions at the start of each chapter as a bridge between modern scientific understanding of what happened and the experiences of the characters. But then these dry excerpts really transformed the book, since, like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, they offered a detached and external viewpoint on the disaster that was unfolding.

Here is Harris' account of the devastating natural phenomenon which inspired his book:

Pompeii is a haunting and beautiful place. 'In the early morning, it is true, the heat is at times oppressive,' wrote the great German archaeologist, August Mau, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. 'No breath of air stirs, and we look longingly off upon the expanse of sea where, far away on the horizon, in the direction of Capri, a dark line of rippling waves becomes visible. Near it comes, and nearer. About ten o'clock it reaches the shore. The leaves begin to rustle, and in a few moments the sea breeze sweeps over the city, strong, cool and invigorating. The wind blows till just before sunset. The early hours of the evening are still; the pavements and walls of the houses give out the heat which they have absorbed during the day...'

The best time to arrive is in the late afternoon, just as the big coach parties are preparing to leave; the best way in is through the gate beside the amphitheatre, at the opposite end to the main public entrance. (After two-dozen visits I have learned these tricks the hard way.) Walk along what was once the main shopping street, past the Roman snack-bars and election graffiti, and you come to a big crossroads with a fountain. Turn right and climb the hill towards the Vesuvius Gate. Ahead of you rises the shattered outline of the volcano. The sun is on your back. And as you draw closer to the gate you may find that you smell something – the familiar, dusty aroma of fresh water drying on hot stone. I have recently written an entire novel on the basis of that smell. It has taken me three years.

It was, by all accounts, a summer very similar to the one we enjoyed last year. Day after day of cloudless blue skies. The brilliant orange fringes of the hillside fires creeping dangerously close to the tourist resorts on the Mediterranean coast. No rain. Unnatural heat... The Greek historian Dio Cassius, writing around the turn of the second century, speaks of the 'terrible dryness' which encircled the Bay of Naples – the Roman Riviera – in that summer of AD 79, as wells and springs that had provided water for generations dried up.

Although we do not know for certain, it seems reasonable to

infer that the extreme conditions also affected one of the glories of Roman civil engineering – the sixty-mile aqueduct known as the Aqua Augusta, which delivered water to a quarter of a million people in nine towns around the Bay of Naples. The citizens of the eastern United States have just experienced what it is like to lose a vital public utility in the middle of a sweltering August heat wave. For the Americans it was electricity. For the Romans it may well have been water. The first town on the Augusta's main line – the matrix, as the Roman engineers called it – was Pompeii.

Then, as now, the extreme temperatures brought a vague sense of unease. We sense, as we slap on the suntan lotion and watch the thermometer creep past 100 degrees, that something terrible may happen to civilization: we ponder these omens and we call it global warming. The Romans on the Bay of Naples also sensed an impending catastrophe. Dio Cassius gathered together some of the contemporary accounts of curious phenomena in the weeks beforehand. Apart from the dryness, 'numbers of huge men appeared, but bigger than any human, more like the Giants in paintings. They were seen on the mountain [Vesuvius], in the surrounding countryside, and in the cities, wandering over the earth day and night, and also journeying through the air... There were frequent rumblings, some underground, sounding like thunder, others on the surface, making a bellowing sound.'

At noon on 24th August the Romans discovered exactly what these portents heralded when the summit of Vesuvius exploded in one of the largest volcanic eruptions in recorded history. They could have had no idea what was happening. Indeed, it is only in the last 20 years that we have begun to understand ourselves exactly what occurred. It appears that the citizens of Pompeii may have been the first human beings to hear a sonic boom. As the summit split, a column of ash, rock and pumice stone (known collectively as tephra) accelerated into the air at a speed of 1,440 kilometres per hour – Mach 1 – breaking the sound barrier and billowing to a height of 25 kilometres. The volcano was fountaining tephra at a rate of around 150,000 tonnes per second.

Once the eruption column reached the stratosphere, a wind blowing south-south-east at 72 kilometres per hour began carrying it directly over Pompeii. According to one eyewitness, Gaius Plinius Secundus, the 17 year-old nephew of Pliny the Elder, commander of the Roman fleet, the column of debris resembled 'an umbrella pine, for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches... In places it looked white, elsewhere blotched and dirty, according to the amount of soil and ash it carried with it.'

Within 30 minutes of the initial explosion, a cascade of pumice stones, roughly the size of golf-balls, began hitting the city like hail, filling the streets with debris at a rate of 15 centimetres per hour. It would have been utterly dark, the sense of terror must have been extreme, the noise deafening. But the air would have been breathable and this bombardment was not in itself fatal: pumice is light, with a low density; it floats on water. Only as that pitch-black afternoon wore on, at about five or six in the afternoon, would roofs have begun to collapse under the weight. By seven, the pumice in the streets was 1.5 metres deep. The eruption continued all night, the vent widening from a radius of 100 to 200 metres, the colour of the pumice changing from white to grey as deeper layers in the magma chamber were tapped, the mass discharge rate increasing to 180,000 tonnes per second.

But if the fall of pumice did not inflict many fatalities, what did? It was not until the eruption of Mount St Helens in 1980 that scientists were finally able to come up with a definitive answer to this 2,000 year-old mystery. In the words of the volcanologist Peter Francis: 'There comes a point where so much magma is being erupted so quickly that the eruption column density becomes too great for stable convection to persist. When this condition prevails, *column collapse* takes place, generating pyroclastic flows and surges, which are far more lethal than tephra fall.' In layman's language: the searing hot gases which had been shooting upwards for twenty hours, supporting the

weight of pumice, were suddenly squeezed sideways by the weight of material above, and were sent sweeping down the flanks of the volcano at the speed of a hurricane.

By this time it was approximately eight o'clock in the morning in Pompeii. Two thousand people were wandering in the darkness at the level of their roofs. It may even be that some, thinking the worst was over, had actually come back into the city to look for survivors and dig out their possessions. They would have seen a brilliant line of light hurtling out of the blackness towards them.

The pyroclastic surge – an incandescent wave of toxic gas and particles, travelling at perhaps 200 miles per hour at a temperature of 300 degrees centigrade – rolled over the northern perimeter of the city, shearing walls a metre thick, lifting people off their feet, blowing their clothes over the heads. It would have taken it less than half a minute to pass across the town. There could have been no escape. According to the standard work on volcanology, the *Encyclopaedia of Volcanoes*: 'The human body cannot survive in temperatures over 200 degrees centigrade for more than a few moments, especially in the fast moving current of a surge. Trying to breathe in the dense cloud of hot ash in the absence of oxygen would lead to unconsciousness in a few breaths, as well as causing severe burns to the respiratory tract... clothes and hair would immediately ignite, but then go out in the absence of oxygen, only to rekindle again when the flow had passed and the body came into contact with fresh air.'

Pompeii was obliterated, along with at least nine other towns and settlements in Campania: not just Herculaneum, but also Oplontis (where a palace with an Olympic-sized swimming pool was said to have belonged to Nero's wife), Tora, Sola, Cossa and Veseri, Leucopetra, Civita and Taurania. The entire shape of the coastline was altered. The sea receded half a mile. Rivers changed their courses. We talk today, in suitably awed tones, about mankind's 'weapons of mass destruction' but it is worth bearing in mind that, according to one calculation, the thermal energy released during the AD 79 eruption of Vesuvius was equivalent to 100,000 Hiroshima atomic bombs.

Watch out in the next *Omnibus* for the second instalment by Harris, focusing on parallels between Rome and the modern world!

Robert Harris and the historian Andrew Wallace-Hadrill will discuss Pompeii from the perspectives of the novelist and the ancient historian on Tuesday 28th September at 6.15 pm at the Royal Geographical Society, London. Tickets and information from C. M. Mann, 16 Leigh Street, London WC1H 9EW; tel/fax: 0207 387 0020. This is a fund-raising event for the British School at Rome.